Critically Analyse The Realistic Conflict Theory

Social Psychology (University of Otago)

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Introduction:

Realistic conflict theory first coined by D.T Campbell (1965)

- Premise: attitudes and behaviours of ingroup members towards the outgroup will reflect the objective interests of the ingroup

Two assumptions:

- If the interest of the two groups coincide, then relations between groups will be amicable and harmonious
- Conflict of interest between two groups then relations between groups will be characterized by antagonism and hostility.

Can help explain many conflicts

- Men and women: for jobs/ men have jobs then women cannot get them - Oppression of women over the centuries is based on the idea that men want to retain power over any resources they might have
- Maori vs Pakeha
- Blacks and whites: only so many jobs going around that the white get them and blacks are out of jobs

Empirical support: Robbers Cave

- Boys aged 12, all from white middle class homes
- All carefully screened before study
- Only those from stable homes where admitted
- Observed effects could not be attributed to social or psychological deprivation

Stage one: boys were divided into 2 groups (effort to separate friends)

- Initially boys given task that emphasized cooperation
- Undertook normal camping activities
- Participants developed their own norms, names, leaders, followers, status hierarchies etc.

Stage two: Boys brought into competition with each other. Series of contests (e.g. tug of war, softball etc.) prizes for winner (cups and pen knives)

On objective conflict of interest was introduced between the groups

- the groups moved from a state where they were INDEPENDENT of one another to a state where they were NEGATIVELY INTERDEPENDENT of one another (i.e. what one group gained the other group lost)

First stage: Harmony between groups
Second stage: Hostility between groups

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Groups teased each other through name calling e.g. COWARDS, BUMS, SNEAKY
Interactions escalated into verbal abuse, fights and raids on other cabins.

Issues:
- Ostracism: didn’t have support or access to support from parents etc.
- Boys become aware of what was going on

Three groups were involved (e.g. experimenters)

RGCT is a well organized and understandable theory of intergroup hostility. All major postulates, propositions, hypotheses, and concepts are clearly delineated and unambiguously stated. Relationships between variables are made explicit. Therefore, in terms of formalization and coherence, the theory has a very robust foundation.

Conflict or competition over scarce resources--the major etiological factor for RGCT--has been considered, and empirically shown to be, an etiological factor of intergroup hostility by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists. In terms of empirical studies specifically designed to examine RGCT, the results have been nearly always positive. Unfortunately, direct tests of RGCT are scarce, probably because of their difficulty and expense in design and execution. Therefore, the accuracy of the theory is strong if one considers the available empirical evidence, but the theory needs more direct empirical investigations.

RGCT has certainly been one of the most influential theories of intergroup relations, and Sherif's work in particular is cited profusely. Nearly every social psychology text dealing with intergroup relations has a major presentation and discussion of RGCT and Sherif's experiments. Sherif's findings about the influence of superordinate goals have inspired numerous practical formulations for a variety of intergroup settings such as industry, education, and international politics (Goldstein, 1984).

Given the scope and depth of the influence of RGCT, it is curious that there is really no direct contemporary extension of the theory, or research projects designed to elaborate on the original theory. Indeed, it is difficult to find articles that work directly with the theory that are dated in the 1980s or 1990s. Most references to the theory are simply rehash of Sherif's original work.

RGCT could be expanded to incorporate concepts espoused by social identity theory. While Sherif focused on the impact of competitive goals as the etiological factor in intergroup hostilities, he also found that the mere discovery of another group significantly altered perceptions and behaviors. After the groups discovered one another and before the introduction of competitive goals, a prominent degree of rivalry had emerged. This suggests that the relationship between the psychological variables and the situation variables may be much more complex than indicated by RGCT. As stated by Billig (1976), "The social structural variable of competition cannot be held to be the pure and simple cause of the extreme negative outgroup perceptions" (p. 319).

Unfortunately, this phenomena of "spontaneous intergroup rivalry" is not integrated into Sherif's RGCT. It is, however, the cornerstone of social identity theory, which, incidentally, downplays the importance of realistic group conflict. In addition to Sherif's own observations, data collected by Tajfel and Turner (1986) implies that overt intergroup competition is not a necessary condition for intergroup adversity.

Sherif and Sherif (1979) do discuss cognitive factors such as stereotyping, ingroup and outgroup images, and categorical judgments. However, such cognitive factors are not integrated into the overall theory of realistic group conflict (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is suggested that attitudes towards outgroup members stem primarily from ingroup contacts, rather than from personal experiences with the outgroup. The nature of such contacts are, furthermore, determined by the reciprocal interests and goals of the groups involved. Consequently, intraindividual sources of hostility (e.g., personality,

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cognitive factors, attitudinal structure) are largely inconsequential to the theory. Along these lines, RGCT would not view intergroup problems as stemming from some sort of deviate personality, nor simply and directly as a problem of the modal practices applied within the bounds of the ingroup to other members. For example, the idea that Germans and Japanese are more "warlike" because of their authoritarianistic traditions is rejected. Sherif and Sherif (1979) point out that Britain engaged in more than twice as many wars as Japan or Germany. Accordingly, RGCT would be more apt to explain warfare in terms of the vested interests to be protected and expanded.

RGCT also challenges the contact hypothesis; although, as evidenced by recent theoretical developments in the contact literature (e.g., Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Pettigrew, 1992), the two perspectives are not completely incompatible. It should be noted that there is no single agreed upon contact theory (see Jackson, in press). Whereas Allport (1954) originally stressed the need for cooperative contact experiences (as well as equal status and sanctioning by authorities), which may be likened to superordinate goals, many subsequent researchers (e.g., Moore, Hauck, & Deene, 1984; Ray, 1983; Spangenberg & Nel, 1983) subsequently dropped this criterion. As discussed above, the empirical evidence clearly shows that when opposing groups are simply brought together, even if in a favorable atmosphere (e.g., a movie, festival), hostilities are not likely to decline and may in fact be bolstered. This proposition is readily acknowledged by both RGCT and most major contact theorists.

Contact theory (e.g., Cook, 1985; Pettigrew, 1971) further suggests that in order to reduce prejudices, the contact experience should facilitate interpersonal acquaintance and friendliness. In theory, this should lead to acknowledgment of similarities and, based on the similarity-attraction paradigm, thus generate mutual understanding and liking, feelings which are incompatible with prejudice. This interpersonal notion is directly incompatible with the strictly intergroup perspective of RGCT. As previously discussed, Sherif formally emphasized the distinction between interpersonal and intergroup behaviors, and he contended that only the latter were germane to the analysis of group tensions and conflict. This distinction was subsequently greatly expanded and elaborated on by Tajfel (e.g., 1978, 1981) in the development of social identity theory. Hewstone and Brown (1986) have recently elaborated on this distinction within the framework of contact theory. They argue, in part, that only when the contact is perceived as intergroup will attitude changes generalize to other outgroup members or situations.

As Pettigrew (1992) has pointed out, contact theorists and researchers (as well as social psychologists in general) have largely ignored the impact of cumulative effects. In contrast, as previously discussed, this is a primary concern of RGCT and of Sherif's general philosophical orientation. Finally, whereas RGCT addresses both the rise and decline of overt intergroup conflict and hostile attitudes, contact theory is almost exclusively concerned only with the reduction of prejudiced attitudes.

One of the greatest strengths of the theory lies in the empirical investigations carried out by Sherif (cf. Billig, 1976; Michener, DeLamater, & Schwartz, 1986; Taylor & Moghaddam, 1987). The researchers took great care to ensure high validity. For example, problems of experimenter bias and selectivity of observation were resolved through using a combination of methods. The obstacle of demand characteristics was resolved by using a complex field method whereby the subjects did not realize at all that they were subjects. Furthermore, because the experiment took place in a naturalistic setting, it can be argued that the results have high external validity.

The study by Bobo is not as robust to criticism. Kinder and Sears (1981) argue that Bobo (a) failed to distinguish group-interest/threats from self-interest/threats, (b) confused the distinction between objective conditions and subjective perceptions, (c) failed to distinguish between threats to whites' material well-being and threats to their status, and (d) unjustly assumed that group interests were equivalent to group conflict (i.e., did not consider the possibility that the groups may not perceive their interests as being in conflict). Analyses of the same data (Kinder & Rhodebeck, 1982; Sears & Kinder, 1985) found that direct personal racial threats have only the faintest impact on whites' race-related political attitudes or other measures of racism, and that threats posed to whites' safety, to their neighborhoods, and to their children's education had little to do with the support they expressed for racial equality. In fact, Kinder and Rhodebeck's (1982) analyses suggested that support for racial

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equality is largely autonomous from the stresses and strains of private life and from tangible racial threats. Such a finding is in direct conflict with RGCT.

RGCT excels in fulfilling theoretical functions (see Tzeng & Jackson, 1990). In terms of the function of decomposition and nomologicalization, the concepts used by RGCT are systematically organized and logically arranged. However, there are concepts and variables in the literature (e.g., category width, relative deprivation, authoritarianism) that are difficult to classify in the RGCT scheme. Improving this aspect of the theory would allow greater integration and could lead to a more comprehensive analysis of the issues at hand. RGCT focuses on how goals (competitive and superordinate) operate to produce or reduce intergroup hostility. For the most part, such goals are used as final explanatory concepts. The theory does not address how and under what circumstances these goals are developed in the first place nor how they are formulated subjectively.

RGCT has implications for controlling intergroup hostility. It suggests that intergroup hostility can be prevented by minimizing competition between groups. Unfortunately, how this is to be accomplished is not clearly elaborated by the theory. The application of superordinate goals as a means of reducing intergroup conflict has been explored with good success in field experimentation. Some authors (e.g., Frank, 1967) have advocated that superordinate goals (e.g., cooperative interactions in space or pollution control projects) can help to resolve international hostilities. However, this seems overly simplistic. Such an analysis looks only at the outward signs of intergroup relations and fails to take into account the depth (e.g., history) of the situation.

Billig (1976) has criticized the concept of superordinate goals as being limited to only certain intergroup encounters. They cannot, Billig asserts, eradicate conflicts between groups with significantly different levels of power and authority. In Sherif's experiments, for example, no amount of superordinate goals would diminish the basic division between the experimenters and the subjects. Billig extends this analysis to the industrial setting. If the industry is run for the employer's profit this will conflict with the wage demands of the employees. Under such circumstances, superordinate goals cannot eradicate the contradiction between the employer and the employees. On balance, it should be noted that Sherif fully realized that superordinate goals cannot be applied blindly without consideration of the wider social context. They must arise from the relationships between groups in a fashion so compelling that they can be recognized within each group (Sherif, 1966).

Billig (1976) has additionally criticized RGCT for neglecting third party influences on intergroup conflict. This would include the role of the experimenters/camp authorities:
The institutionalization of competition is, of course, a crucial feature in Sherif's theoretical description of his experiments and is the corner-stone of his account of this sort of intergroup situation. Quite obviously, organized competitions do not arise in some sort of social vacuum, but are created by specific people or groups in specific situations. In the case of the boy's camp experiments, the simplistic explanation would state that the authority group created the competition, and this, in turn gave rise to the resulting intergroup hostility. (p. 310)

Such an analysis suggests that the experimental results should be interpreted in terms of an even wider social context than suggested by RGCT, especially, the overall power relations in the total situation. In addition, the groups were created by the third party and thus are artificial in the sense that they do not represent a spontaneous development, even though they do meet the definition of "group" proposed by Sherif. Similar criticisms have been leveled at Tajfel's minimal group paradigm experiments. The groups do not have a "real" history, are not distinct physically, and do not have "real world" counterparts. Although it cannot be denied that Sherif's field studies were exceptionally strong in terms of internal and external validity, it remains to be determined if findings based on such groups will successfully generalize to intergroup problems outside of experimental settings.

Sherif's studies on the normative influence on judgments and perceptions (considered the essential factors in the formation of an attitude) may also be criticized as being artificial. They were conducted primarily in laboratory settings using the autokinetic effect, an obviously nonsocial stimuli. Sherif was, of course, aware of these factors and addressed them thoroughly at theoretical and philosophical levels. In the case of the autokinetic studies, there was a loss of personal involvement that would correspond to the motivational-affective "component" of attitudes. Sherif (1966) held that attitudes are

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necessarily cognitive-affective-behavioral, and any separation of these criteria are arbitrary and distort the nature of attitudes. He suggested that, with self-involving issues (like politics or religion), attitudes tend to persist for long periods of time, even when they become maladaptive or dysfunctional.

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